

BULK VENDING MACHINE

Field of the Invention

This invention relates to vending machines. In particular, this invention relates to a bulk vending machine for vending articles of any shape.

5 Background of the Invention

Bulk venders, colloquially known as "gum ball machines", are widely used for dispensing confectioneries and other small articles of merchandise. A typical bulk vender has a hopper assembly comprising a transparent merchandise storage bin, seated over a dispensing wheel that revolves in a hopper. A plurality of product
10 compartments are recessed into the dispensing wheel. A patron deposits the required token or coin into the coin mechanism and turns the handle, which rotates the dispensing wheel to move one of the product compartments over a dispensing chute, and thus conveys a preset amount of merchandise to the dispensing chute. The hopper assembly is located over a body which is mounted on a base, defining a secure
15 compartment containing a cash box into which the coin mechanism ejects the deposited token or coin. Bulk venders of this type are well known to those skilled in the art.

Bulk vending machines tend to dispense merchandise in fairly accurate metered amounts as long as the merchandise is smooth-walled and has a relatively
20 regular shape (e.g. is symmetrical about two or three orthogonal planes). Articles having these characteristics tend to fill the product compartments in the dispensing wheel fairly uniformly, because they drop easily into the product compartments and are self-packing so the overall product density remains substantially uniform throughout the product bin and in each product compartment. Bulk venders are
25 therefore well suited for the unsupervised dispensing of articles such as gumballs and other hard, round or oval confectionary, because the user can virtually be guaranteed to receive the same preset amount of product with each revolution of the coin mechanism.

However, conventional bulk venders are relatively poorly suited for
30 dispensing rough-surfaced articles and articles which have an irregular shape, such as

toys and lollypops. These types of articles tend not to provide a uniform product density throughout the product bin and do not fall neatly into the product compartments, with the result that a different volume of merchandise (and sometimes no merchandise at all) may be dispensed with each rotation of the coin mechanism.

- 5 This is unacceptable, because it introduces an element of risk into the purchase of product from a bulk vender, and consumers will not purchase merchandise from a bulk vender if there is any perceived risk that they will not receive the product that they are paying for.

- Conventional bulk venders are also unsuitable for vending soft articles,
- 10 because of the way a conventional bulk vender is configured. In order to ensure that the dispensing chute is not in direct communication with the product bin (which would result in product free-flowing through a product compartment to the user), the portion of the dispensing wheel situated over the dispensing chute is covered by a shroud. Rotation of the dispensing wheel pushes the next successive product
- 15 compartment underneath the shroud, where it comes into communication with the dispensing chute and empties the product through the dispensing chute, as is well known. Soft articles (and some irregularly shaped articles) can become wedged between the trailing edge of the product compartment and the shroud, jamming the vender. This is also unacceptable, because the operators of such venders rely upon the
- 20 continuous operation of the vender for revenue generation. Each time the vender jams, not only does the operator have to incur the cost of service personnel to repair the jam, but potential revenues during the interval between jamming and repair are lost.

- As such, there are limited types and shapes of articles which can be dispensed from a conventional bulk vender without special packaging. In order to
- 25 vend irregularly-shaped articles or soft articles, one or more articles must be placed into a symmetrical hard-shelled capsule. This significantly increases the cost of the product. In some cases the cost of capsule can exceed the cost of the product, making the sale by bulk vender impractical. Accordingly, bulk venders are not generally used to dispense such merchandise.

It would accordingly be advantageous to provide a bulk vender which is capable of dispensing irregularly-shaped and soft articles without requiring any special packaging. It would further be advantageous to provide such a vender which is entertaining to view in operation, to attract users and thus increase revenues to the vending machine operator.

Summary of the Invention

The present invention provides a bulk vending machine which is capable of dispensing any type of article, including soft articles and irregularly-shaped articles. The vending machine of the invention is suitable for vending virtually any kind of article, irrespective of the shape or texture of the articles' exterior surfaces.

The invention accomplishes this by providing a dispensing conduit having a revolving mouth that floats on the top of a heap of articles in the product bin. The mouth is movable between a horizontal orientation, in which the mouth can scoop articles off of the surface of the heap, and a vertical orientation in which a throat of the dispensing conduit opens to allow an article which has been captured by the mouth to fall through the dispensing chute and be dispensed to the purchaser.

In the preferred embodiment rotation of the coin mechanism actuates a clutch, which engages a user-accessible handle to the dispensing conduit. Revolution of the dispensing conduit by turning the handle causes the mouth to revolve around the heap of articles, scooping up one or more articles in its path. The mouth is preferably provided with an adapter configured to accommodate the specific shape of the article being vended. Also, in the preferred embodiment a second user-accessible handle permits rotation of the mouth between horizontal and vertical orientations and the mouth has two operative positions: when horizontal the mouth is in a capturing position capable of capturing an article; once the article has been captured the user can rotate the mouth to a vertical position, which allows the captured article to fall through the dispensing conduit into a dispensing chute, which is accessible to the user.

In the preferred embodiment the head is supported by a cable which is weighted by counterweights, reducing the effective weight and allowing the head to remain on top of the heap of articles to facilitate the capture of an article by the mouth.

5 The present invention thus provides a vending machine, comprising a product bin for storing articles, disposed above a secure compartment, a dispensing chute in communication with a neck, the dispensing chute being accessible to a user and the neck being movable substantially vertically within the product bin, a mouth movable between a capturing position and a dispensing position, to be respectively in
10 communication with articles the product bin and with the neck, the mouth being capable of revolving about an axis of the neck, and an actuator for actuating a mechanism to revolve the mouth about the axis of the neck, whereby when the mouth is in the capturing position, revolution of the mouth captures an article from the top of the articles, and when the mouth is rotated to the dispensing position the article is
15 dispensed through the neck and the dispensing conduit.

 The present invention further provides a method of vending an article in a bulk vender comprising a product bin for storing articles disposed above a secure compartment, a mouth in communication with a neck in communication with a dispensing chute accessible to a user, the mouth being movable substantially
20 vertically within the product bin and rotatable between a capturing position in which the mouth is communication with articles the product bin and a dispensing position in which the mouth is in communication with the neck but not the articles in the product bin, comprising the steps of: a. moving the mouth to the capturing position ; b. enabling a revolving mechanism and revolving the mouth about the product bin to
25 capture at least one article; c. moving the mouth to the dispensing position, such that the captured article is dispensed through the neck into the dispensing chute; and d. preventing further revolution of the mouth after the captured article has been dispensed until the revolving mechanism is enabled.

Brief Description of the Drawings

In drawings which illustrate by way of example only a preferred embodiment of the invention,

Figure 1 is a partially cutaway perspective view of a bulk vender embodying the invention with the top and top securing bracket removed for purposes of illustration,

Figure 2A is a cross-sectional side elevation of the bulk vender of Figure 1 showing the product bin substantially full,

Figure 2B is a cross-sectional side elevation of the bulk vender of Figure 1 showing the product bin substantially empty,

Figure 3A is a partially cutaway perspective view of the mouth rotation mechanism,

Figure 3B is a partially cutaway perspective view of the vender showing the head supported in the product bin,

Figure 3C is a side elevation showing the manner of supported the head,

Figure 4 is a partially cutaway perspective view of the dispensing conduit revolution mechanism,

Figure 5 is a perspective view of the clutch for the dispensing conduit revolution mechanism,

Figure 6 is an exploded perspective view of the mouth rotation mechanism,

Figure 7 is a perspective view of the mouth in a capturing position,

Figure 8 is a perspective view of the mouth in an intermediate position,

Figure 9 is a perspective view of the head equipped with an adaptor suitable for capturing and dispensing a lollypop, with the mouth in a capturing position,

Figure 10 is a perspective view of the head of Figure 9 with the mouth in a
5 dispensing position,

Figure 11 is a perspective view of the mouth equipped with an adaptor suitable for capturing and dispensing a gumball,

Figure 12 is a perspective view of the dispensing chute,

Figure 13A is a side elevation showing the dispensing chute in the rest
10 position, and

Figure 13B is a side elevation showing the dispensing chute in the dispensing position.

Detailed Description of the Invention

A bulk vending machine 10 according to the present invention
15 conventionally comprises a transparent product bin 12 seated over a secure compartment 14. The product 12 is separated from the secure compartment 14 by a floor 16. The secure compartment 14 contains the coin mechanism 20, the cash box (not shown) into which coins 1 are deposited by the coin mechanism 20, and the mechanisms which connect the user-operated knobs to the operative portions of the
20 vender 10. The secure compartment 14 may be separated by a divider 19 from a base compartment 18 containing the dispensing chute 150, to prevent a user from gaining access to the secure compartment 14; however, in the preferred embodiment the dispensing chute 150 itself provides a mechanism for preventing access to the inside of the base compartment 18, as is described in detail below.

25 Articles 2 in the product bin 12 are dispensed to the user by being captured by a head 70 comprising a mouth 80, the head 70 being movable substantially vertically within the product bin 12 so that the mouth 80 remains at the top of the heap of articles 2 in the product bin 12. According to a preferred embodiment of the

invention, a tubular dispensing conduit 30 projects through the floor 16. The dispensing conduit 30 is retained in a fixed position over the dispensing chute 150 and extends through the secure compartment 14 to approximately the level of the floor 16. The dispensing conduit 30 is rotationally fixed adjacent to its lower end to a
5 dispensing conduit gear 32. The dispensing conduit 30 is revolved by a dispensing conduit drive gear mechanism 60, illustrated in detail in Figure 5, which is engaged to the dispensing conduit gear train 31 when the coin mechanism 20 is rotated, in the manner described in detail below. The gear mechanism 60 is rotated by a user-accessible dispensing conduit drive handle 62 via shaft 64 disposed through the wall
10 of the secure compartment 14. Thus, when the gear mechanism 60 is engaged to the dispensing conduit gear train 31, as described in detail below, rotation of the dispensing conduit drive handle 62 translates into revolution of the dispensing conduit 30.

Movably mounted over the dispensing conduit 30, preferably in
15 telescoping relation, is a tubular neck 40. The neck 40 is slidably mounted through a neck rotation gear 50, and rotationally fixed relative to the gear 50 by ribs 42 which slide through complementary axial recesses 52 formed along the hub of the gear 50, best seen in Figure 3A. The gear 50 is rotationally mounted to the floor 16, for example trapped in a slot 54a milled into the peripheral edge of opening 54 and
20 circumscribing the gear 50. Thus, rotation of the neck rotation gear 50 revolves the neck 40, while at the same time the neck 40 can move freely axially through the neck rotation gear 50 and telescopically over the dispensing conduit 30.

Mounted on top of the neck 40 is the head 70, comprising a mouth 80 rotationally mounted to a throat 90. The throat 90 is mounted to the neck 40, for
25 example by an annular collar 96 which may comprise collar portions 96a, 96b as shown in Figure 6. The mouth 80 preferably comprises a tubular elbow 82 having an exposed end 84 for receiving an article 2 from the product bin 12 and a concealed end 86, best seen in Figure 6, contained inside the throat 90 and rotationally mounted to the throat 90.

In order to promote the extraction of an article 2 off of the top surface of the heap of articles 2, which both facilitates the capture of an article 2 and reduces abrasive decomposition of other articles 2 in the storage bin 12, means for maintaining the head 70 on top of the articles 2 is provided. In the preferred embodiment the head 70 is supported in the product bin 12 by a cable 120, best illustrated in Figures 3B and 3C, which suspends the head 70 to reduce the effective weight of the head/neck assembly to just a few ounces. The head/neck assembly is thus supported by the cable 120, but not fully suspended, so the head/neck assembly will descend under the influence of gravity as the heap of articles 2 in the product bin 12 diminishes, but the effective weight of the head/neck assembly is too small to apply any significant force to the heap of articles 2, which might otherwise damage the articles 2 in the product bin 12 as the neck 80 is rotated.

Preferably the cable 120 is removable to allow for servicing and maintenance, for example being affixed to the mouth 80 by nut 121 trapping enlargement 121a and engaged to threaded post 123. In the embodiment shown the cable 120 is fed through pulleys 124 mounted within the bracket 122 that secures the top 13 (shown in Figure 3C), through one of the extrusions 126 forming the frame for the product bin 12 (and optionally trapped therein by appropriately configured plugs, not shown), and into the secure compartment 14. Within the secure compartment 14 the cable 120 is affixed to weights 128, which are preferably individually removable cumulatively serve as an adjustable counterweight 130. In this fashion the effective weight of the head/neck assembly can be set as required for the particular articles being vended, so that the mouth 80 always remains "floating" on top of the heap of articles 2 and does not become submerged within the heap of articles 2. It will be appreciated that the cable supporting system may not be necessary with every type of articles, and some types of articles will by their nature support the head 70 without the need for additional support.

The exposed end 84 of the mouth 80 is provided with an adapter 72 configured to capture a single article 2 from the heap of articles 2 in the product bin 12. In the embodiment shown in Figure 3A the articles 2 are lollipops, which are irregularly-shaped by the provision of a ball of confectionary at one end of a stick.

Accordingly, the adapter 72 is configured with claws 72a projecting from a scoop 72b to most readily capture a lollipop. It will be appreciated that different types of articles 2 may require differently configured adapters to maximize opportunities for capturing the article 2 as the mouth 80 is revolved around the product bin 12, for example the
5 scoop-shaped adaptor 74 illustrated in Figure 11 which is particularly suitable for capturing a gumball. The configuration of the adapter is a matter of selection, determined by the type and shape of article 2 being vended and the number of articles 2 desired to be dispensed with each cycle of the coin mechanism 20.

The mouth 80 is rotatable between a capturing position, in which the
10 exposed end 84 of the mouth 80 is oriented generally axially horizontally as shown in Figure 9, and a dispensing position in which the exposed end 84 of the mouth 80 is oriented generally axially vertically as shown in Figure 10. Preferably an opening 88 in the side wall of the elbow 82 near the concealed end 86 of the mouth 80 comes into alignment with the neck 40 only when the mouth 80 is in the dispensing position
15 shown in Figure 10, so that when the mouth 80 is lowered from the dispensing position, the exposed end 84 of the mouth 80 is positioned to capture an article 2, but the opening 88 is out of alignment with the neck 40, closing off the neck 40 and effectively blocking the dispensing conduit 30. This prevents a user from obtaining multiple articles 2 by continuous revolution of the dispensing conduit 30 with the
20 mouth 80 in the capturing position.

To further prevent the unintentional vending of multiple articles 2 during a single dispensing cycle of the coin mechanism 20, the exposed end 84 of the mouth 80 is blocked (or partially blocked) by a finger 92 when the mouth 80 is in the capturing (horizontal) position. The finger 92 may be fixed to the collar 96 on which
25 the throat 90 is mounted, and configured and oriented such that throughout the path of rotation of the mouth 80 from the capturing position shown in Figure 9 until just before the dispensing position shown in Figure 10, the finger 92 intrudes through a hole in the adapter 72 and blocks the exposed end 84 of the mouth 80. The finger 92 will thus prevent a captured article 2 from entering the exposed end 84 of the mouth
30 80, as shown in Figure 8, until the mouth 80 has reached the dispensing position shown in Figure 3B. Once the mouth 80 has reached the dispensing position, the

finger 92 has receded from the exposed end 84 of the mouth 80 (see Figure 3A) and allows the captured article 2 to fall into the mouth 80 to be dispensed to the user. Preferably the finger 92 has a bent or hooked end 92a, preventing dislodgement of the finger 92 from the adapter 72.

5 The mouth 80 is rotated between the capturing and dispensing positions by a set of teeth 41 formed in the top rim of the neck 40, engaging a mouth rotation gear 98 affixed to the concealed end 86 of the mouth 80. Since the mouth 80 is only required to rotate about 90°, it is only necessary to provide teeth along the circumference of part of the mouth rotation gear 98. It is also only necessary to
10 provide teeth 41 along part of the rim of the neck 80, however to avoid requiring service personnel to align the neck 40 when loading the product bin 12 it may be preferable to provide teeth 41 around the entire rim of the neck 80 as shown in Figure 6. A stop 91 (shown in Figure 7) should be provided to prevent the mouth 80 from over-rotating in either direction.

15 The neck rotation knob 58 is permanently coupled to the neck rotation gear 50 via shaft 51 and bevel gear 59a. Thus, even without depositing a coin into the coin mechanism 20, the mouth 80 can be rotated between the capturing and dispensing positions. However, without revolving the dispensing conduit 30 to move the mouth 80 about the product bin 12, it is not likely that the adapter 72 could capture an article
20 2. Accordingly, while in an alternative embodiment (not shown) it is also possible to use the clutch mechanism to block or disengage the neck rotation knob 58 at the same time as the dispensing conduit drive knob 62, this would ordinarily be unnecessary.

Revolution of the dispensing conduit 30 is prevented unless a coin has been deposited into the coin mechanism 20 by a clutch associated with the gear
25 mechanism 60, best seen in Figure 5. The gear mechanism 60 is mounted on a pin 64a so as to be axially moveable between a position remote from the dispensing conduit gear train 31 (comprising planetary gears 31 and 32) and a position engaged with the dispensing conduit gear train 31. A dispensing conduit drive gear 66 is mounted in a shaft portion 61b which slidably receives shaft portion 61a coupled to the dispensing
30 conduit revolution knob 62. Thus, the shaft portion 61b supporting dispensing conduit

drive gear 66 can thus move axially relative to the knob 62, allowing the drive mechanism 60 to move toward and away from dispensing conduit gear train 31, but the shaft portions 61a and 61b are rotationally fixed relative to one another.

Rotating the coin mechanism 20 by turning handle 20a actuates the clutch
5 to bring the gear mechanism 60 into engagement with the dispensing conduit gear train 31, by rotating a cam 20b which forces a lever 64 to overcome the biasing force of tension spring 65a and cause the gear mechanism 60 to swing on its mounting pivot 64a, such that the dispensing conduit drive gear 66 engages the dispensing conduit gear train 31.

10 A latch 68, biased toward the mounting arm 65 by a spring 68a, snaps into an engaged position when the hook 68b clears the lower end of the mounting arm 65, latching the gear mechanism 60 into the engaged position. Although the gear mechanism 60 is biased toward the disengaged position by the tension spring 65a urging the mounting arm 65 in a direction away from the dispensing conduit gear train
15 31, the latch 68 retains the gear mechanism 60 in the engaging position as the dispensing conduit revolution knob 62 is rotated. This rotates the dispensing conduit drive gear 66 against gear 33, which in turn rotates gear 32 to cause the dispensing conduit 30 to revolve. The dispensing conduit 30 is rotationally coupled to the neck 40 by ribs 37 projecting from a bushing or sleeve 37a, best seen in Figure 3A, so the
20 neck 40 rotates as the dispensing conduit 30 rotates, which causes the head 70 to revolve in the product bin 12.

The cam 20b is oriented to force the gear mechanism 60 into the engaging position immediately after the coin has been accepted by the coin mechanism 20. For example, in a coin mechanism such as that described in United States Patent No.
25 5,609,235, issued March 11, 1997 to Schwarzli, which is incorporated herein by reference, a diameter measuring dog measures the coin during the rotational cycle of the mechanism and allows the mechanism to rotate past the acceptance point only if a coin of the correct size has been deposited. This particular coin mechanism is referred to by way of example only, and it will be apparent to those skilled in the art that any
30 coin mechanism capable of forcing the gear mechanism 60 into the engaging position

is suitable for use in the vending machine 10 of the present invention, and the invention is not intended to be limited to any particular coin mechanism 20.

From the operator's standpoint, it is desirable to vend only a single article with each coin 1 deposited into coin mechanism 20. However, the user must be
5 satisfied that the vending machine 10 will remain operable until an article 2 has been dispensed, otherwise users will not use the vending machine 10. In the preferred embodiment, the invention provides mechanism for releasing the clutch to disengage the dispensing conduit drive mechanism 60 only in response to an article 2 dropping through the dispensing conduit 30 into the dispensing chute 150.

10 In the preferred embodiment the clutch release mechanism comprises a flap 110 positioned beneath the dispensing conduit 30, biased to a position blocking the bottom of the dispensing conduit 30 and pivotable to an open position (shown in Figure 2A) whereby the dispensing conduit 30 is in communication with the dispensing chute 150. A connecting rod 112 (shown in Figure 5) pivots with the flap
15 110 and allows a spacer bar 114 hanging on a pivot 114a to move under the influence of gravity to a position between the latch 68 and a cam wheel 69 mounted on the shaft portion 61b so that it rotates with the shaft 61. The spacer bar 114 thus fills a space between the latch 68 and the cam wheel 69.

When the flap 110 is in the closed position shown in Figure 2B, the rod
20 112 holds the spacer bar 114 away from the space between the latch 68 and a cam wheel 69, and the cam 69a passes through the space without touching any other structure. However, when the flap 110 is opened by an article 2 falling through the dispensing conduit 30, the spacer bar 110 drops into the space and next time the cam 69a passes the latch 68 it pushes the spacer bar 114 against the latch 68 in the
25 unlatching direction, which in turn pushes the latch 68 to unhook the latch 68 from the gear mechanism 60. The spring 65a then pulls the gear mechanism 60 out of engagement with the dispensing conduit gear train 31, releasing the clutch and disconnecting the knob 62 from the dispensing conduit gear train 31.

This prevents any further revolution of the mouth 80 in the product bin 12.
30 In order to re-engage the gear mechanism 60 to the dispensing conduit gear train 31, a

coin 1 must be deposited into the coin mechanism 20 and the coin mechanism 20 must be rotated until the cam 20b again engages the clutch by forcing the dispensing conduit gear mechanism 60 into engagement with the dispensing conduit gear train 31.

5 The dispensing chute 150 in the preferred embodiment comprises an open-ended trough pivotally mounted near the floor of the base compartment 18, as at 152. In the preferred embodiment means is provided for preventing a user from accessing the inside of the base compartment 18. The open end 150a of the dispensing chute 152 is accessed by manually opening access door 154, which is hinged to the vender body
10 as at pivots 155 and articulated to side walls of the dispensing chute 152 via arms 156 fixed to the door 154. The arms 156 thus pivot with the door 154 as the door 154 is raised to the dispensing position. The free ends of the arms 154 are provided with bushings or rollers 158, which are trapped in grooves 160 formed in or through the side walls of the dispensing chute 152. The shape of the grooves 160 is such that as
15 the door 154 is opened the rollers 158 riding along the grooves 160 raise the dispensing chute 152 from the rest position shown in Figure 13A to the dispensing position shown in Figure 13B.

 Preferably the flap 110 overlaps the closed end 150b of the dispensing chute 152. This serves to ensure that the flap 110 and the dispensing chute 152 do not
20 interfere with one another in operation; that the flap 110 closes properly when the user retrieves their purchase from the dispensing chute 152, to reset the clutch release mechanism for the next user; and that the user cannot access the dispensing conduit 30 while the access door 154 is open.

 The invention thus operates as follows: A service person grasps the head
25 70 and manually raises the neck 40, either by grasping the neck 40 or by drawing the counterweight 130 toward the bottom of the base compartment 18 so that the cable 120 raises the neck 40. The service person fills the product bin 12 with articles 2, then lowers the head 70 onto the top of the heap of articles 2 and locks the vender 10 by engaging a lock (not shown) through the top 13 to the threaded post 123 on the top
30 securing bracket 122.

A user deposits a coin 1 into the coin mechanism 20 and rotates the handle 20a. This rotates the cam 20b, which forces the gear mechanism mounting arm 65 to pivot toward the dispensing conduit 30, and thus forces the gear mechanism 60 (and particularly dispensing conduit drive gear 66) into engagement with the dispensing
5 conduit gear train 31 comprising gears 32 and 33.

The user lowers the mouth 80 to the capturing position by rotating the neck rotation knob 58, which rotates the neck rotation gear 50 via shaft 59 to rotate the neck 40. As the neck 40 rotates the teeth 41 around the upper rim of the neck 40 engage the teeth around the periphery of the mouth rotation gear 98, to rotate the
10 mouth 80 down to the capturing position shown in Figure 9.

The user can then turn the dispensing conduit drive handle 62, causing the mouth 80 to revolve on the surface of the heap of articles 2 in the product bin 12. This forces the adapter 72 forward against the heap of articles 2 until an article 2 is captured by the adapter 72. The finger 92 prevents the article 2 from entering the
15 exposed end 84 of the mouth 80, so the article is held in the adapter 72, as shown in Figure 7. To dispense the article 2 the user rotates the neck rotation knob 58, which rotates the mouth rotation gear 98 through neck rotation gear 50 and neck 40 to raise the mouth 80. As the mouth 80 is rotated toward the dispensing position the finger 92 recedes from the exposed end 84 of the mouth 80. At the dispensing position, shown
20 in Figure 3A, the finger 92 has substantially receded from the exposed end 84 of the mouth 80, and the article 2 drops into the elbow 82.

As the user continues to turn the neck rotation knob 58, the opening 88 in the concealed end 86 of the mouth 80 comes into alignment with the upper end of the neck 40 and the article 2 drops through the neck, and then through the dispensing
25 conduit 30.

As the article 2 drops through the bottom end of the dispensing conduit 30 it strikes the flap 110, forcing the flap 110 to the open position shown in Figures 2A and 13A. As the flap 110 opens, the connecting rod 112 recedes toward the dispensing conduit 30 and allows the bottom end of the spacer bar 114 to swing into the space
30 between the latch 68 and the cam wheel 69. Further rotation of the dispensing conduit

drive knob 62 turns the cam 69a against the spacer bar 114. The spacer bar 114 in turn pushes against the latch 68 and unlatches the latch 68 from the gear mechanism mounting arm 65. The spring 65a, which is in a tensioned condition whenever the gear mechanism 60 is engaged to the dispensing conduit gear train 31, forces the gear
5 mechanism 60 to disengage from the dispensing conduit gear train 31, thus preventing further revolution of the dispensing conduit 30. This completes the dispensing cycle.

If the vending machine 10 is not completely reset after the dispensing cycle is complete, for example if the user simply removes the dispensed article 2 and does not further turn the dispensing conduit drive knob 62 to unlatch the latch 68 and
10 release the clutch, the vending machine 10 will be completely reset when the next user tries to turn the dispensing conduit drive knob 62 unless the coin mechanism 20 is rotated to return the cam 20b back to the engaging position.

When the user opens the access door 154 to access the open end 150a of the dispensing chute 152 and retrieve their merchandise, the rollers 158 ride along the
15 grooves 160 to raise the dispensing chute 152 to the dispensing position shown in Figure 13B. This changes the attitude of the dispensing chute 150 so that the article 2 rolls down toward the open end 150a, and closes the flap 110. When the user releases the access door 154 the dispensing chute 150 returns to the rest position shown in Figure 13A under the influence of gravity, but the flap 110 remains closed.

20 As articles 2 are dispensed from the product bin 12, the height of the heap of articles 2 diminishes. Because the neck 40 slides in telescopic relation to the dispensing conduit 30, the head 70 is always maintained on the top of the heap of articles 2 in a "floating" fashion by the cable 120. Optionally one or more agitators (not shown), may be provided to agitate the articles 2 as the neck 40 revolves and thus
25 to maintain a substantially uniform product density throughout the product bin 12. As the articles 2 are depleted the neck 40 slides progressively lower over the dispensing conduit 30, until the product bin 12 is substantially empty as shown in Figure 2B.

Because the neck 40 rotates with the dispensing conduit 30, it is possible to rotate the mouth 80 between the capturing and dispensing positions by simply
30 locking the mouth rotation gear 50 against rotation, and as the dispensing conduit 30

continues to revolve the mouth 80 will automatically move. However, in the preferred embodiment a mouth rotation knob 50 is provided so that the mouth 80 can be rotated between the capturing and dispensing positions independently of the revolution of the dispensing conduit 30, thus giving the user an additional degree of control over the capture of an article 2.

It is also possible to provide a mouth resetting mechanism (not shown), which may be actuated by the opening of the flap 110 or revolution of the dispensing conduit 30, so that the mouth 80 automatically returns to the capturing position at the end of a dispensing cycle. However, this is optional and detailed instructions (pictorial or otherwise) can be provided to show the user how to move the mouth 80 to the capturing position in order to capture an article 2. Moreover many users, particularly young users, will prefer to have total control over the position of the capturing mechanism.

As a safety feature, in the preferred embodiment the gear 66 can move slightly axially along the shaft portion 61b, just enough to disengage from the gear 33 even when the clutch mechanism is engaged. Thus, if the revolving dispensing conduit 30 jams during use and the user tries to force the dispensing conduit drive knob 62 too hard, rather than damaging the mechanism the spring 61c will compress and the gear 66 will slip out of engagement with gear 33. Also, if the teeth of the gear 66 are not exactly aligned with the teeth of the gear 33 when the cam 20b forces the gear mechanism 60 into the engaging position, the spring 61c will compress until the user starts to rotate the dispensing conduit drive handle 62, at which time the gear 66 will slip into engagement with the gear 33.

Various embodiments of the present invention having been thus described in detail by way of example, it will be apparent to those skilled in the art that variations and modifications may be made without departing from the invention. The invention includes all such variations and modifications as fall within the scope of the appended claims.